

21 FEB 1973

Needed for Domestic Problems: Office of Social Intelligence

BY MAX LERNER

NEW YORK—In the alphabet game of governmental agencies, there is one I cast a strong vote for—an OSI, or Office of Social Intelligence. It doesn't exist, but it ought to.

I find it shocking (as I wrote in an earlier piece) that in our bright lexicon of government we preempt the term "intelligence" for espionage and research focused on the capabilities of foreign governments—the Central Intelligence Agency and its whole spawned family—but we have no agency to gather intelligence and suggest strategy for our most pressing domestic problems.

I don't know what this shows about Americans as a people, and if I knew, I wouldn't like it. But I am quite confident about the need to shift our misplaced and distorted priorities.

The espionage can go on, for whatever it may be worth. But we need to dust off the spookhouse tinsel from the term "intelligence" and put it in a setting of human needs worthy of it.

Let me put four propositions summarily about the why and the how:

1—Americans have a mythology about problem-solving: that if you get the "facts" and appropriate the money, you can solve the problem.

We have facts galore about poverty, schools, crime, prisons, narcotic addiction, race relations, tax inequities, mental health, alienations, violence. We also have the money. But we are learning the bitter lesson that you can't throw either facts or money at a problem and hope it will go away.

For each problem cluster, we have to have an approach or lead, some strategy for getting at it.

The history of the past decade is strewn with the wrecks of solutions which never solved the problems, or that did some good but evoked new hostilities or dangers in the process. The poverty program, community control of schools, busing, scatter-site housing, the Model Cities program, drug abuse and penalties, pornography policing—cite any of these and you get an intense reaction which suggests that the problem hasn't yielded to a hastily applied solution.

Even the "facts" about any problem are not given from the start. It is only when you have a provisional strategy that you know what facts to dig for, in order to test its probable fitness before you apply it. When your research tends to confirm the approach, then and only then do you have the right to ask for money, and then the money will be forthcoming.

2—Our accepted methods of gathering social intelligence are stiff, stilted and archaic.

There are all kinds of White House conferences on a variety of problems, but they are too public, and they get lost in quarrels about who should be represented. Like the U.N. Assembly, they become a stage for displaying political machismo.

The congressional committee public hearings do yield some intelligence, especially under a wise and hard-working leadership. But they are also too public, and they become either a form of ladder-climbing for the committee chairman or a tug-of-war between interested groups.

As for the presidential commissions—on civil rights, race riots, pornography, population control, energy resources—they gather good bodies of data and get out a mountain of monographs, and then write a report which is a one-day editorial wonder and which the President and Congress proceed to ignore.

3—We need a federal agency which will gather and make available the social intelligence needed for an effective strategic attack on the nation's problems.

The insights and expertness that exist today on university campuses, in business and unions, among professional groups and in a large variety of voluntary organizations are simply not tapped for national purposes.

We go on the placid assumption that the welter of books, articles, speeches will make their way into the channels of public decision. Very few do. What passes for convention-

al wisdom in policymaking is often stale, hackneyed stuff that would crumble to dust if confronted by a sharp, critical intelligence in the give-and-take of discussion.

4—That is what I have in mind for the Office of Social Intelligence—not White House conferences, not blind fact-gathering, not lumbering, over-staffed commissions, not endless drowsy hearings of congressional committees, but the provision of channels for a face-to-face exchange of ideas and strategies.

The task of the OSI would be to find out, for each problem or cluster of problems, who has been giving it the freshest study—its history, economics, politics, psychology, pathology, law, social dynamics.

It wouldn't be either hard or costly to get these men and women together in groups of five or six or a dozen, let them go at each other as long as necessary in private sessions with no holds barred, keep transcripts, study and evaluate them, keep constant liaison with Congress and the executive agencies, and thus develop new and more workable strategies for our festering problems.

Would the courts interfere? Not fatally. They, too, are looking for new approaches, as witness the current arguments in the school tax case, *Serrano v. Priest*. A single B-52, lost over Hanoi, could have kept the OSI going for a couple of years.